BEZANGO, WA
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Bezango WA 985 # 7

It seems most small towns have a "Grand House" looming on a conspicuous hill, and Bezango is no exception. But the mansion of Derry Ayre Thiessen has been vacant for over four decades. Automatic interior lights go off and on, but as we like to say about the house (and the family that owns it), the lights are on but nobody's home.

Derry A. Thiessen once had a successful fast food chain called Derry King. They used to be all over the Pacific Northwest. As an added attraction, they included a kiddie fun activity center where kids could jump into a giant bin of balls and frolic. Unfortunately these were glass Japanese fishing net balls that used to frequently wash up on the Coast, only a short drive away. Needless to say, Derry King attracted a number of lawsuits, putting all the franchises out of business except for the original one in Bezango.

Through legal trickery, Derry was able to protect his vast fortune and other numerous business interests against a sea of attorneys. What finally did him in was politics. He made the mistake of running for Mayor, and he lost. Not only did he lose big, but he lost to a dog. So he did what all other Mayoral runner-ups did. He moved out of town to Winnehutt, which is about 30 miles away as the crow flies, but much longer by road. He left his mansion and downtown stores empty. Shortly after the move, he died in Winnehutt on Columbus Day, 1962.

That's when it got weird.

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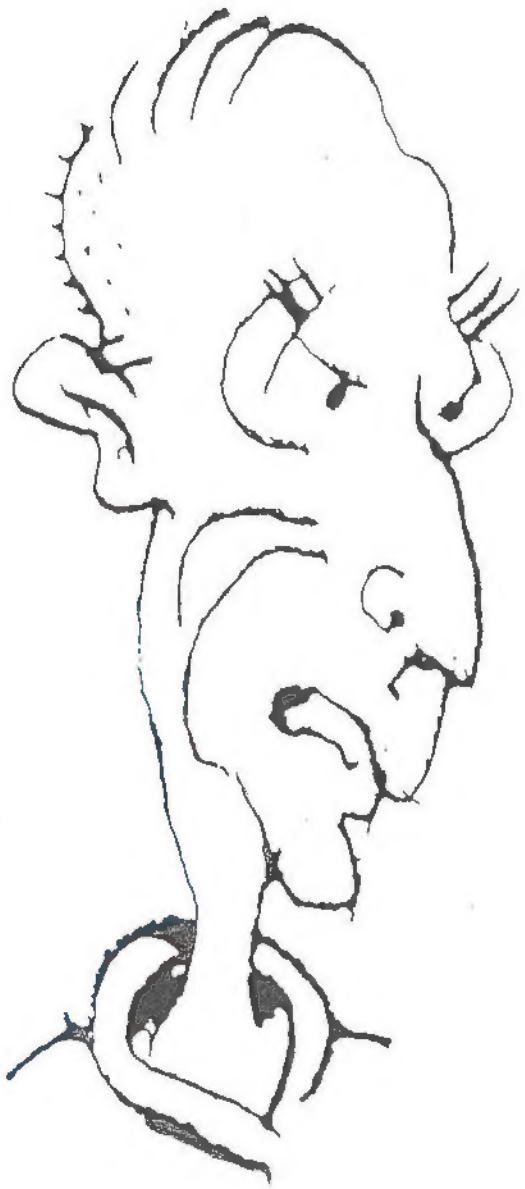


Those of you who are old enough to remember have already figured out that Columbus Day, 1962 was also known as the Columbus Day Storm, the worst hurricane in the history of the modern Pacific Northwest. Since Bezango sits in kind of a natural bowl, it managed to avoid the brunt of the tempest. Normally in a bad weather situation, seagulls fly in from the beach for protection. And in 1962 they came. But so did another kind of bird, a bird we had never seen before.

After the storm, as always, the seagulls returned to the ocean. But these other birds stayed. And stayed.

They are kind of black and shapeless screeking things that at first glance look more like bats than birds. Dogs and cats run from them. If you shoot one, they disintegrate into a powder. They have the ability to hover in one spot, even if there isn't a breeze.

Elvira Flemm, who once played in the same bowling league as Roy Acuff's wife (not an essential fact to this story, but worth mentioning just so you know), managed the Derry King in Bezango. She was sort of the unofficial keeper of the birds until the business finally closed down. Since these creatures, at least at the beginning, seem to congregate on the roof and parking lot of the Derry King, we called them Derry birds.

Every customer would buy an extra side of fries for the sole purpose of throwing them to the Derry birds to keep them occupied while the people made a run for their car after they finished eating at Derry King. Yes, I'll admit it. We were a bit scared of these birds.

Ask anyone in Bezango to give a description of Russell "Hustle" Dragon and they'll say, "He looks like a jerk!" But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Le Belette was once an opulent clothing store owned by Derry A. Thiessen. Like his mansion, he simply locked the doors and left it as it was. After the demise of the final Derry King, the Derry birds gained entrance to Le Belette through a hole in a skylight and it became their aviary. The entire floor and other flat surfaces are now covered with several inches of Derry bird droppings.

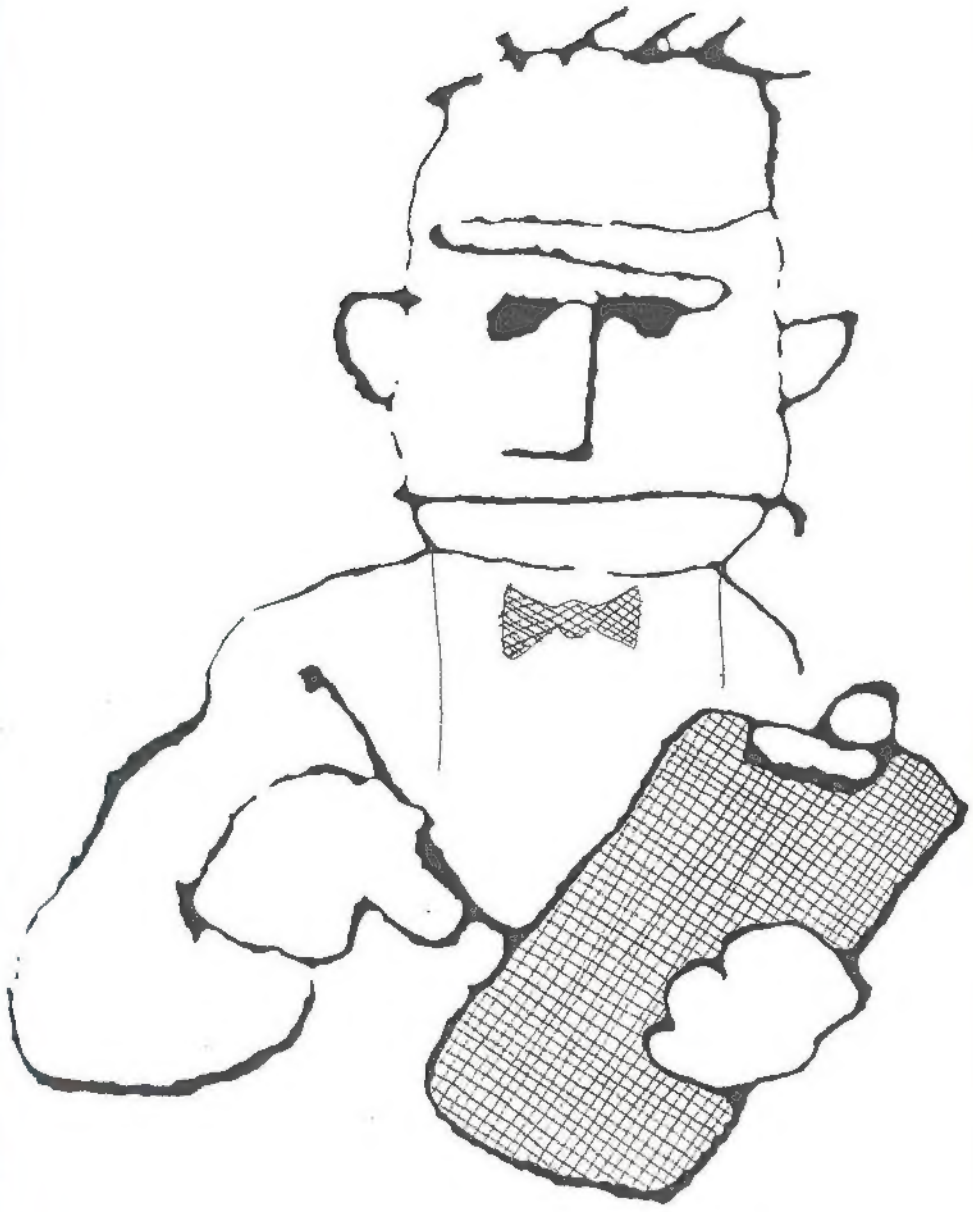
"Hustle" Dragon built a makeshift lean-to at the front of the store, creating a covered extension where paying customers, usually gullible tourists, could view the Derry birds at close range. City Councilperson Agnes Googybugg managed to kick him out and now the birds are back in free public view.

"Hustle" now has a new tourist attraction. For awhile he had an octopus in a fishtank, with a very big sign heralding his "LIVE OCTOPUS!!" After the thing died, he changed the billboard to:

DEAD
"~~LIVE~~ OCTOPUS!!"

To offset the relative unexcitement of a deceased sea creature, "Hustle" also displays a piece of toast shaped like the State of Washington. There are plenty of toast slices shaped liked Wyoming, Colorado, and even Oregon, but a Washington-shaped toast is unusual.

By the way, did I mention he looks like a jerk?



The Derry birds attracted the attention of an ornithologist from a nearby community college. He came armed with a clipboard, camera, and night vision goggles, saying he was going to put "information in formation."

But it seemed the birds were studying him as well. The flock stayed suspended over him everywhere he went. At first it was just 2 or 3 or 4 birds, but as the weeks passed, the sky grew black with Derry birds above the hapless scientist.

Then one day he showed up at Bonker Memorial Hospital and told Doc Dragon he had learned the secret of the Derry birds. At that point he shed his clothes, jumped up on the reception desk, flapped his arms, and made a fairly decent impersonation of the screeking call of the birds.

He was sent to Western State Hospital in Steilacoom, where sane men of science made the place famous for being a national leader in lobotomy experiments in the 1940s. Bezango used to have such an institution a long time ago, but it closed and now the same building serves as Homer T. Bone High School.

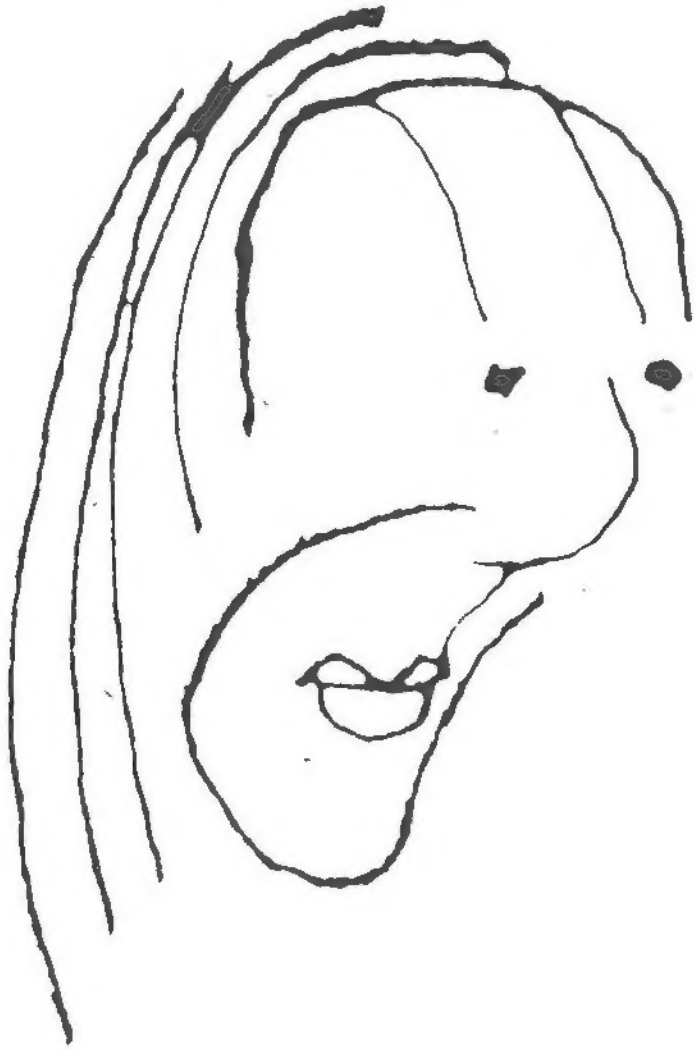
In honor of the building's past, the official mascot of Homer T. Bone High School is the "Lunatic." No joke. Not exactly the most politically correct choice, but tradition is hard to break. And a sports tradition at that, the worst and most pointless kind. A movement to change the name to the more neutral "Patients" was soundly defeated in a recent school election.

At game half-times, a guy runs around with a giant "Lunatic" head, you know, googly eyes, tongue hanging out, wearing a straight-jacket. And the kids scream, **"GO LUNATICS GO!"** It scares the Hell out of the opposing teams. Actually, it scares the Hell out of me too!

Being the "Lunatic" mascot is big honor. This year that role is filled by Guy Nixon. Guy really enjoys eating stale party food the morning after. That's all I really know about him. Well, to tell the truth, that's all I really want to know.

When the "Lunatic" mascot runs out into the field at half-time with his giant "Lunatic" head and straight-jacket, he is followed by a secondary character. She wears a giant nurse head and chases him around with an enormous hypodermic needle.

This year that role is filled by Dofie Moop, who is normally a modest and shy girl. She can usually be found sitting quietly in the park, at the foot of the Buddy Dragon statue. "I'm sitting here in my own body in my own life," she'll tell you. And yes, she really does want to be a nurse.



But here I am digressing about a wholesome activity like youth and sports when I should be dwelling on the grim topic of those damn Derry birds. They tend to flock around certain places and characters. One such person is Judge "Sparky" Sneedmoss.

In Bezango, to say justice is blind isn't quite true. He can kind of see, more or less. It would be more accurate to say justice is deaf and incontinent.

Here's how he acquired his nickname. Every morning he leaves his house, which is decorated inside by alternating religious wall plaques and firearms on display, and revs up his enormous Lincoln Town Car. Since the muffler is shot, everyone within six blocks knows he's coming. People calmly get off the street and sidewalks and wait until he drives by. Folks take bets on what he'll hit each day. A fire hydrant, a parked car, a store window. The victim is expected to eat the cost.

He invariably has a seat belt hanging out from a closed car door. The metal from the buckle throws sparks as he drives, hence his moniker, "Sparky." During the two weeks in August when it isn't raining, a fire crew follows his local travels.

But the Derry birds always follow him. If his house roof is black with the things, you know he is home.

Another place the Derry birds like to gather is the roof of the First National Bank of Bezango. They seem to favor the autocratic loan officer, Gloria Googybugg.

Like the case of Judge Sneedmoss, the birds follow Gloria around. Even without the creatures covering her roof, her front yard is something of a local attraction. She removed all the grass in her lawn and replaced it with chunky white gravel. This is surrounded by a seven-foot high cyclone fence. As a special touch, the space is populated by her extensive collection of lawn ornaments. Her main standard for selecting the various figures (elves, frogs, etc.) seems to be that they share an expression of anger and disgust. Although local art critic Hilda Doolittle "Sniffy" Dragon has called the yard "Detestable" in private, she would never ever put that in print in her column in the *Bezango Stimulater*, which is a testimony to Gloria's power in the community.

Gloria has an unusual test to see if an applicant deserves a loan. She pulls her lower lip down real far and says in a low voice, "Uuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuhhhhh!" for about 20 very uncomfortable seconds, and then sits back and says nothing. The way the applicant responds is everything. If you think I'm going to tell you the right and wrong way to act in this situation, forget it! You'll have to learn like the rest of us have had to learn. Bwaaahahahahaha!

One guy who knew the way to act and got a big fat loan was Striggy McGee. Notice his first name is not in quotes. This is due to the fact that his name really **is** Striggy. Think what that would do to you, being known as Striggy all of your life. The story goes that there was not enough room for "Stringfellow" on the birth certificate, so his parents shortened it.

Anyway, the Derry birds follow him everywhere. With his loan from the First National Bank of Bezango, Striggy started a storage unit facility called "Kram-Yer-Krap." Even when he isn't there managing the place the Derry birds line the roof of the business.

Needless to say, this hasn't really helped him attract customers. Already a bitter man, Striggy seems extra annoyed the last couple years. "My life is just one long vapor trail," he recently bellowed among his fellow drinkers in the Head Loader. No one in Bezango has shot and disintegrated more Derry birds than Striggy. But for every one he shoots, two more replace it.

We heard business has gotten so bad for Striggy that this summer he`ll take an extra job as the "Happy Time Ice Cream Truck" man. He'll have to drive slowly through town, attracting excited children with a loud, unceasing and repetitive delightful and cheerful tune! We can`t wait to watch this.

Unlike the previously mentioned unfortunate ornithologist, Robert Sherman Ratlipp was a local scientist. Notice I said "was."

We all called him "Bobby Sherman," and even young people who had no idea who Bobby Sherman was called him that and still felt clever. Anyway, call him Robert or Bobby, he was still a "Bob," and we all know there are certain behaviors associated with that name that boldly resist all explanation.

This Bob decided to visit the center of our planet. He wanted, in true Bob fashion, to build a tunnel through the earth. He figured if he jumped in this tunnel he would not emerge on the other side, rather he would oscillate back and forth in the middle as the force of gravity continually pulled him,

Many years ago he started the tunnel. Then we kind of forgot about him. That hole is big enough to drop a truck into. At the Head Loader we are all betting he hit an underground sea of lava. And it is a bit warm when you stand by that dark pit, even in January.

The Derry birds love it there. They just hover over that big hole all the time. Some people claim they can hear unearthly noises coming from that cavity, but that is silly. If it is coming from deep in the earth, how can it be unearthly?

Stan Gorch is also known as "Sir Sighs-A-Lot."
He walks around town, observes the daily life,
shakes his head, and heavily exhales the unsaid.